

# Distant Suffering

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Morality, Media and Politics

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Luc Boltanski

Translated by Graham Burchell

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## The aesthetic topic

### 7.1 A third way

To summarise, on the one hand there is an unfortunate who suffers and on the other a spectator who views the suffering without undergoing the same fate and without being directly exposed to the same misfortune. To adopt an acceptable attitude, the spectator cannot remain indifferent nor draw a solitary enjoyment from the spectacle. However, he cannot always intervene directly; he cannot always go into action, that is to say, unify the framework within which he acts and the framework within which the unfortunate struggles in such a way as to bring together in a single situation the two originally different situations. The further the spectator is from the unfortunate the more the disjunction between their situations seems to be insurmountable and in consequence action becomes more problematic. We have seen that a politics of pity necessarily provokes this disjunction because, as a politics, it must rise above local miseries in order to form a general picture, although in order to keep the dimension of pity present it cannot be content with establishing equivalences, of an accounting kind for example, and must therefore compose this picture by assembling particular sufferings in such a way as to obtain an immense imaginary collection of all kinds of unfortunates.

Although forced to be inactive, if the spectator is to remain within a morally acceptable framework he is none the less encouraged to show an interest which takes account of the misery of the person he observes and if not to intervene directly in his life then at least to place himself in an active disposition of someone concerned for him. Pity consists in this. There is a route open to him: to pass on the spectacle, to communicate it to others. But his description cannot be realistic or factual. For reasons of symmetry he must depict in a single operation both the unfortunate's suffering and what he himself feels at the sight of it, how he is affected by

it. This procedure frees a space in which emotion can be displayed within a discourse. Pity can be shown in the form of indignation. Emotion is then detached from the unfortunate and directed at a persecutor who is accused. Emotion can also be freed in tender-heartedness which ignores the persecutor and equally distances itself from the unfortunate, but in order to bring to the fore the presence of a benefactor. These two routes can be blocked by criticism: indignation is only a veiled persecution; tender-heartedness is no more than selfish enjoyment unaware of itself. But the unmasking of hypocrisy itself seems to be a dead end. The alternative it seems to propose at first – that of a concern out of cruelty – does no more than pass through pity in order to turn it into its opposite. Now if cruelty is possible, and even customary, in a communal figure, there can be no politics of cruelty which, also availing itself of two classes, the fortunate and unfortunate, could have the aim of using the pity the latter inspires for the happiness of the former.

However, the story is not over. A third possibility emerges from the criticism of the first two. It consists in considering the unfortunate's suffering as neither *unjust* (so as to become indignant about it), nor as *touching* (so as to be moved to tears by it), but as *sublime*. An initial movement of pity is contained and even repressed (in the way that indignation had to be contained to give room to proof), in such a way as to be taken up in the transformed form of *sublimation*. We will trace this third route through one of its topical modes of expression as it was constituted in France in the first half of the nineteenth century.

### 7.2 The painter of horror

Let us return again to the scheme taken from Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. A spectator looks at an unfortunate. This time he is not inclined to sympathise with the resentment of the suffering person and so follow him in accusation. He therefore checks that initial movement within himself which could have made him indignant. In effect, he has learned the lesson of the criticisms levelled at a topic of denunciation: in sympathizing with the resentment of the unfortunate and in accusing a third person, the spectator actually does no more than quench his own desire to persecute in revenge, to satisfy his envy, his taste for violence and destruction or, to take up Sade's terms again, to give vent to his natural propensity for crime.

But neither is the spectator inclined to sympathise with the unfortunate's gratitude to a benefactor and to follow him by shedding tender-hearted tears. He has listened to the criticisms which question the authenticity of a topic of sentiment: in hypocritical tender-heartedness the benefactor

actually seeks only to gain the kind of pleasure that the spectacle of suffering alone can give him.

Holding in check the emotion which rises within him to be released as indignation or tender-heartedness, rejecting the masks of denunciation and sentiment, this third spectator confronts the truth and looks it in the face. What he sees is the horror. It is inasmuch as he is given up to naked suffering, imputable to no-one and with no hope of remission, that he sympathises with the unfortunate. His primary quality is courage: he dares to cast his eyes on the unfortunate and look evil in the face without immediately turning away towards imaginary benefactors or persecutors. He allows himself to be taken over by the horrific.

Does this mean that the position of the actor we have called the *agent* remains vacant in this form of the system? If this were the case the spectator would be hysterically confused with the unfortunate, given up to the horror of a blind suffering but unable to say anything about it. In fact we have seen that the possibility of a meta-describer who is able to weld together the unfortunate's suffering and the spectator's sensibility in a single statement can be generated from the other actor Smith calls the 'impartial spectator' whose basis is the desire for the approval of others. Now the possibility of approval by someone else is conditional upon the existence of an external reference point on which the internal movements of separate spectators can converge. The existence of an agent is therefore necessary in order to understand the possibility of sympathetic communication and the formation of a collectivity on this basis.

Who can we put in the position of an agent here? A painter or, more generally, an *exhibitor* who is able to get us to see suffering in its sublime aspect. The painter sees the unfortunate suffer and depicts his suffering. But how, it could be objected, can this character, who does nothing either for or against the unfortunate and who oddly resembles the spectator himself, be given the status of an *agent*? He can because by painting the unfortunate's suffering, by revealing its horror and thereby revealing its truth, he confers on this suffering the only form of dignity to which it can lay claim and which it gets from its attachment to the world of the already painted, of what has already been revealed within an aesthetic register.

But might it not be objected that it is always the satisfaction of a pleasure which the spectator seeks in the spectacle of suffering, and even in a much more patent fashion in this than in the previous two cases? No, the presentation of the unfortunate in his horrific aspect is the only one which makes possible the communication of that unrepresentable horror which overcomes the spectator and which is none other than the horror residing within him and which defines his condition.

Finally, a last objection, can the spectator and the agent really be distinguished from each other here, since it is now a case of an agent who observes? Yes, for the painter acts insofar as he paints. He is a creator and displays the horror in the materiality of a picture. The spectator does nothing. He sympathises with the painter; he is a painter who does not paint. It is at the cost of doing nothing that his contemplation of the horrific can be total.

Recognisable here is the portrait of the *dandy* as Baudelaire gives him to us in his theoretical and critical writings, particularly in the essay on Guy, *The Painter of Modern Life*.<sup>1</sup>

### 7.3 With neither indignation nor tender-heartedness

We will quickly examine the form in which the unfortunate's suffering is conveyed in this new topic, which we call the *aesthetic topic*, and how, inseparable from this, a crystallisation takes place of a collectivity formed by the trace left in those who communicate in this way. In the aesthetic topic, as in the topics of denunciation and sentiment we have already looked at, the spectator confronts the double demand of publicity of speech and symmetry in the statement. As in the two previous topics, the spectator must therefore blend within the same statement a recapitulation of the unfortunate's suffering and the specification of the observer's state. But this state cannot be described as *sentiment* since the refusal of sentiment, whether of indignation or tender-heartedness, is precisely what constitutes this topic's initial move: 'The distinguishing characteristic of the dandy's beauty consists above all in an air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved' (*The Painter of Modern Life*, p. 29).

Unquestionably we find this double refusal in Baudelaire who takes up the criticisms of both indignation and tender-heartedness which were widely diffused at the end of the previous century. He places them next to each other in a way which might seem incoherent if, from the tension between them (and which can be connected with the opposition between 'social art' and 'bourgeois art' described by Cesar Grana<sup>2</sup> and Pierre Bourdieu<sup>3</sup>), a new position was not formed in which the spectacle of suffering is sublimated. In the era of revolutions, as Hannah Arendt emphasises, the unfortunate is either specified as '*enragé*' or as '*miserable*'.<sup>4</sup> But here the unfortunate does not appear in these two aspects which are connected to each other in the 'revolutionary speculations of Victor Hugo' or, as in the *Châtiments*, in the 'humanitarian idealism' of an indignant sounding social poetry.<sup>5</sup> Indignation, as *political* indignation or, more precisely, as *social* denunciation, for which the socialist discourse which accompanied

the formation of the workers' movement was an essential medium, is unmasked by Baudelaire as the disguised manifestation of envy and as the pure desire to persecute.<sup>6</sup>

Beneath political indignation and the denunciation of a persecutor, the lucid gaze sees only selfish interest and, as in the passages of *Mon coeur mis à nu* devoted to the 1848 Revolution, the 'taste for vengeance' or again, according to a theme inspired by Sade (of whom Baudelaire was an admiring reader), the 'natural love of crime' (I, p. 679). 'We must always return to Sade, that is to say to *natural man*, to explain crime' (I, p. 595). As Pierre Pachet has shown, 'Baudelaire's politics' are 'close to Sade's' 'in the central role played by the idea of a criminal nature' and in the representation of a social bond immersed in a *cosmos* animated by 'the universal exercise of a limitless "tyrannical" or "despotic" violence'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the chapter of *The Painter of Modern Life* devoted to the criticism of nature ('In Praise of Cosmetics', pp. 31-4) begins with an ironic reminder of the connection between nature and morality (Baudelaire is thinking here of Rousseau, but his remarks equally apply to the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment when they seek to make sympathy a natural faculty): 'The majority of errors in the field of aesthetics spring from the eighteenth century's false premiss in the field of ethics. At that time Nature was taken as ground, source and type of all possible Good and Beauty.' A portrait of nature taken directly from Sade is substituted for this false idea: 'it is she [nature] too who incites man to murder his brother, to eat him, to lock him up and to torture him.'

As for sentiment, as in the Gothic parodies of the previous century it is only hypocritical *sentimentality*. Either, when it is identified as a bourgeois attitude, it disguises self-satisfaction, complacency, hypocrisy (the 'guillotins have an *interest* in the abolition of the death penalty' (*Mon coeur*, I, p. 684)) and vanity or a form of 'eroticism' which is paradoxically qualified as 'holy' (*Les Drames et les romans honnêtes*, II, p. 40). Or, when it is identified as an attitude of the weak, that is to say, in the first place of women and, in particular, of those 'people unhealthy from sentimental grisettes' (*ibid.*), it is attached, again as in Sade and, later, Nietzsche, to the instinct of self-preservation: the weak are *interested* in making pity a virtue in order to weaken the strong ('the woman Sand . . . has good reasons for wanting to suppress hell' (*Mon coeur*, II, p. 686). The truth of sentiment is revealed in the sentimentality which accompanies the 'philanthropic' intoxication of the hashish eater 'the product of pity rather than of love', 'the first germ of the satanic mind' freed by drug use which makes remorse the servant of pleasure: 'Remorse, that singular ingredient of pleasure, is soon drowned in the delicious contemplation of remorse, in a kind of voluptuous analy-

sis.' In this way the principle of all 'beneficence' is unmasked and, for example, that 'nervous softening' which overcomes Rousseau with a 'sensual pleasure', filling 'his eyes with tears at the sight of a good deed': 'Jean-Jacques was intoxicated without hashish' (*Paradis . . .*, I, pp. 434-436). What is the nature of the dandy's 'heroism'? We see it in the dandy's ability to cast an impassive gaze on suffering, in his coldness and contempt for the sentimental.<sup>8</sup>

But once indignation and tender-heartedness have been repudiated, what position can the person speaking adopt within the statement in which the unfortunate and his suffering are confined? That of someone who looks. We have seen that the spectator is not the painter. The dandy, who precisely for this reason is higher than the painter in the scale of beings, does not paint, since he owes his greatness to the absence of utility, profession or occupation and creates nothing but himself.<sup>9</sup> His action is to do nothing. But sympathising with a painter, inasmuch as the painter looks, the meta-describer appears in the statement as the one who 'watches himself seeing'. This is the principle of Baudelairean 'reflexivity'<sup>10</sup> and of the closely related aesthetic project of 'containing at once the object and the subject, the world external to the artist and the artist himself' (*Philosophic Art*, p. 205). The aesthetic process (which, as we have seen with regard to the dandy, Baudelaire does not confuse with the fabrication of an artefact) thus consists in making the object enter the subject's interiority in order, by coming out from within, to reveal its unrepresentable aspect. This process, and only this process, saves suffering from insignificance (from the absurd, from nihilism, etc.). Once the fictional characters of the persecutor and the benefactor have been dispensed with along with their illusory reflections, the *enragé* victim and the grateful *misérable*, suffering is looked at in the face and confronted in its truth, that is to say as pure *evil*. But it is by watching himself seeing evil that the spectator can unmask the truth of evil within himself and thus accomplish the fundamental aesthetic process which, in this topic, aims at the nondifferentiation of objective and subjective. The unfortunate's suffering is relevant insofar as it serves this process.

Take the brothel,<sup>11</sup> a typical site for viewing the suffering of the *misérables* in the person of the fallen and sickly prostitute, and consequently where the encounter between the dandy and evil takes place (the latter often personified by syphilis in French literature of the second half of the nineteenth century).<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire advises artists to frequent the brothel because sometimes, 'quite by chance, they [the prostitutes] achieve poses of a daring and nobility to enchant the most sensitive of sculptors, if the modern sculptors of today were sufficiently bold and imaginative to seize upon nobility wherever it was to be found, even in the mire' (*The Painter of Modern Life*, p. 37).

As this example suggests, a characteristic of this topic which distinguishes it from the previous ones is that, purposely detached from the political question, it is no longer subject to the constraints of a world conceived of in structural terms. In fact, as we have seen, one of the essential properties of the topic of denunciation as of the topic of sentiment, was to posit a *system of places* distinct from the human persons able to occupy them. Unfortunate, spectator, persecutor and benefactor, each could be by turns either one or the other. This constraint was actually necessary to secure a minimum compatibility between a politics of pity and the establishment of a political society which meets the requirement of common humanity within the framework of the political city.

#### 7.4 The sublime and the picturesque

To understand this change we must briefly recall how the actor we have called the *painter* was constituted in the second half of the eighteenth century, an actor who cannot figure in Adam Smith's construction of the moral question because Smith posed it in political and social terms. Baudelaire takes this figure, as well as that of the dandy, (whose introduction into France by Barbey d'Aurevilly in particular is a feature of the wave of Anglophilia following reaction to the Napoleonic wars),<sup>13</sup> from the aesthetic debate of the previous century, particularly in the form it took in England. The constitution of aesthetics (traditionally dated from the appearance of Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in 1750) immediately raised the question of its relationship with politics,<sup>14</sup> that is to say, in the terms of a contractualist political science, the question of the connection between *difference* and common humanity conceived of in the form of *civic equality*. Aesthetics is actually defined as a science of pleasure. Since like any science the constitution of its object is subject to a taxonomic imperative, it immediately carries out a radical distinction between two kinds of pleasure, elevated and low. Only some pleasures, the former, fall within the field of the aesthetic mode of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> The distinction is necessary if aesthetics is not to lose itself in a generalised hedonism. But in its train it brings two other kinds of distinction concerning the objects which can provide elevated pleasures on the one hand and the subjects capable of experiencing such pleasure on the other.

In fact aesthetic explanation remains contingent if any object whatever can provide elevated pleasures to no matter what kind of subject. To secure a distinctive aesthetic mode of knowledge we must either go in the direction of a specification of objects (the problem of the criterion of beauty) or in the direction of a specification of subjects (the identification of people

of taste). The first route severely restricts the population of objects which are able to provide elevated pleasure. *Certain* pleasures correspond to *certain* objects. But, by the same token, this route can leave the specification of subjects relatively indefinite. Everyone is in a position to savour these pleasures on condition that they are presented with objects which can provide them. In this case, the addition of a theory of aesthetic *education* makes it possible to at least partially reabsorb the tension between the empirical matter of fact of an inequality of competence in matters of judgement of taste and the anthropological requirement of equality in the presence of the beautiful, which at the same time enables aesthetics to be hitched to politics. Socialising aesthetics are thus neoclassical.

The other route which, after their liberation from corporate restrictions, quickly finds favour with artists because it then opens up an almost unlimited field to their activity, is explored especially by English aesthetics. It consists in pushing back the limits on the list of objects which can give elevated pleasures. But a necessary result of this is that the restriction is shifted almost entirely on to the subjects who are capable of appreciating these pleasures.

This expansion of the range of objects of interest to the formation of an aesthetics extends from Burke's definition of an aesthetic of the *sublime* in 1757 to the debates at the turn of the century which signal the constitution of the *picturesque*, with the publication in 1794 of Uvedale Price's *Essays on the Picturesque*. The extension of the list of objects is carried out in the only direction open to it because it is a direction free from any prior investment, that of the *ugly*, that is to say, first of all, with the sublime – which implies a criticism of beauty,<sup>16</sup> – in the direction of the terrifying, dreadful, horrible and painful,<sup>17</sup> and then with the picturesque, in the direction of the trivial, exotic, popular, caricatural and carnivalesque. The process of pleasure is then defined by a double movement. In the case of the sublime, an initial movement of horror, which would be confused with fear if the spectator was not, as Burke notes, personally sheltered from danger,<sup>18</sup> or, in the case of the picturesque, of astonishment at the ugly, of disgust and rejection, is transformed by a second movement which appropriates and thereby appreciates and enhances what an ordinary perception would have rejected. The pleasure of the sublime is thus a delicious horror and a painful enjoyment.<sup>19</sup>

The category of the picturesque is constituted in order to classify and organise the objects which do not come into the categories defined by Burke: that of the beautiful – sweet and charming (founded on the passions 'which belong to generation') – and that of the sublime – terrible and obscure (founded on 'the Passions which belong to Self-preservation').<sup>20</sup>

Picturesque objects fall between these two categories as it were, and are characterised by irregularity, contrasts, and sudden variations, so that they may fall either on the side of the ugly or on that of the beautiful depending on the quality of the *gaze* brought to bear on them. The introduction of this new category presupposes a reorganisation of the previously established classes and, in particular, a devaluation of the beautiful which, detached from the Platonic ideal, is assimilated to those *average* forms that the greatest number of people are inclined to appreciate, out of habit as it were, to the detriment of the rare, extreme, eccentric forms – of deformities.<sup>21</sup>

But how should one look at an ordinary, ugly or trivial, object, a landscape with no apparent grandeur for example, or a cottage, a peasant, or a beggar, so as to isolate its aesthetic splendour? By seeing it, says, Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourse on Art* written between 1769 and 1790, in the way in which painters have portrayed it: when we have had 'continually before us the great works of Art to impregnate our minds with kindred ideas . . . We behold all about us with the eyes of those penetrating observers whose works we contemplate'.<sup>22</sup> The picturesque is thus the ability to see nature with the eyes of a painter.<sup>23</sup> This informed gaze is that of the man of taste who alone is able to contemplate the world with the eyes of the painter. By the power of a gaze which is able to frame it as it were, the object being contemplated is extracted both from the situation in which it is found and from the series of worldly objects to which it is attached by connections of use, in order to be connected to a different series which is that of objects already painted.

Only the man of taste can extract thus the power of a special enjoyment, of an elevated pleasure, from the ugly which is given to all. In a work written in 1801, *A Dialogue on the Distinct Characters of the Picturesque and the Beautiful*, analysed by Hussey,<sup>24</sup> Uvedal Price places three characters strolling in the English countryside who meet each other at an inn. One of them is ignorant in aesthetic matters while the other two are *connoisseurs* (who differ however in their aesthetic opinions, since one wants to maintain a distinction between the picturesque and the beautiful – closer to a standard of objectivity – whereas the other, more radical, subjects both categories to the power of the informed gaze). A first scene appears to them: a cottage, a hovel, near an old oak, next to which an old Gypsy and his emaciated donkey have halted. Mr. Seymour in his ignorance judges the scene ordinary, uninteresting and even ugly and Mr. Howard and Mr. Hamilton, the connoisseurs, endeavour to get him to understand what can be seen with the eyes of an amateur; the status conferred on them by the powers of a vision capable of seizing, and so of creating, the picture in the imagination

by detaching objects from the ordinary connections in which they are as it were stuck: natural objects like waterfalls, animals or trees, artefacts – huts and carts etc., – or human figures constituted by the gaze as *figurines*. Not everyone has the same aptitude to become a character. The obtuse Mr. Seymour must also be got to understand how the parson's coarse daughter, foolishly judged by him to be ugly, is picturesque if one knows how to compare her with the house she both inhabits and resembles – like her, full of contrasts and irregular, with the appearance of poverty and, at the same time, neat and tidy.

To start with the picturesque belongs to nature in the aesthetic literature of the end of the eighteenth century. But the introduction of human figurines and the connection between the picturesque and the tour<sup>25</sup> open the way to a human picturesque and, as a result, to an urban picturesque of the *miserables*: gypsies, bandits, prostitutes, ragged children and, above all, beggars. They are no longer only an opportunity for the spectator to reveal his interiority, for a representation of his own feelings and his tender-heartedness in the face of suffering – as in the scenes of *A Sentimental Journey* in which Sterne describes his many encounters with the poor – but become the subject of a description which focuses upon their external appearance in order to paint them, to pick out the character, to make them seen as painters would see them., We come across this picturesque again, but now sublimated, in Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen*, with its painters: 'By my profession as a painter I am impelled to scrutinize attentively every face, every physiognomy that comes my way, and you know what delight we painters take in that faculty which gives more zest and significance to life for us than for other men' ('The Rope', *Paris Spleen*, p. 64); or again with its ragged, wild or begging children:

On the other side of the gate on the highway, standing in the midst of nettles and thistles, was another child, pitifully black and grimy, one of those urchin pariahs whose beauty an impartial eye would discover if, as the eye of a connoisseur detects an authentic master under the coachmaker's varnish, it peeled off the disgusting patina of poverty. ('The Poor Child's Toy', *Paris Spleen*, pp. 35–6)

### 7.5 Aesthetic difference

Inclusion of the horrible and the ugly, of the sublime and then the picturesque, and finally, at the start of the nineteenth century, especially in Goya,<sup>26</sup> of the grotesque, considerably extends the list of objects capable of being apprehended as they would be by a painter and thereby opens up an almost unlimited domain to the aesthetic. But, as Luc Ferry comments, the price to be paid for the development of this mode of knowledge is an

increasing subjectification of the aesthetic gaze. If subjectification really is an accompaniment of the individualisation which characterises the artist's condition and, more generally, the relationship to art in the democratic age, which is the substance of Ferry's thesis, nonetheless, paradoxically it has also, at least in the most consistent and radical forms expressed in the aesthetic of the *connoisseur*, precursor of the *dandy*, lead to the abandonment of the project of maintaining contact between thought and pleasure, be it only elevated pleasures, and of the requirement of common humanity developed by eighteenth century political science, by the science that inspired Rousseau when he became *politiste*<sup>27</sup> and in which the topic of indignation found an essential resource on which to base a discourse of denunciation in the form of a fundamental equality by birth and of rights. For if, as Ferry insists, it is true that reflection on taste as the faculty providing access to elevated pleasures was for a long time accompanied by a dogged refusal to abandon all idea of the objectivity of the beautiful, nonetheless the extension of the objects offered to aesthetic appreciation necessarily led at least to the marginalisation, if not the total abandonment, of the idea of criteria of beauty.

Now what maintained contact or, to use an anachronistic term, an interface between aesthetics and politics, was nothing other than the idea of objectivity in the sense of perception without a particular perspective, the origin of which is found not in experimental science but, as we have seen, in the moral enterprise of the eighteenth century, from which science took it fifty years later, and especially in Smith's attempt to reconstruct both morality and the bases of a morally acceptable politics around the double figure of an unfortunate and an impartial spectator who observes him from a distance.<sup>28</sup> For if any or almost any object can provide elevated pleasures and consequently any or almost any subject can be exposed to such objects, how do we explain the fact that *some* can and others cannot savour these pleasures other than by pointing towards properties inherent in the person, like aristocratic qualities? The paradox of good taste as both a faculty of human nature in general and the prerogative of elite minds runs through the aesthetics of the eighteenth century and, in the aesthetic theory of the abbé Du Bos for example, inhabits the debate on how the word 'public' – as a general term subject to a restricted use<sup>29</sup> – should be understood.

The aim of Kant's aesthetics is precisely to untangle this thorny question. Its destiny was, as usual, purely philosophical and consequently it had no effect on the conceptions of connoisseurs and artists.<sup>30</sup> It is the last attempt to combine together within an intelligible whole, and by means of the machinery of reflective judgement, the subjectivity of taste which accompanies the expansion of the field of objects relevant to aesthetics on the one

hand and, on the other, the retention of a quasi-political requirement of common humanity, constituted here as intersubjectivity, by reference to a 'possible universal community', to a 'transcendental sociability', rather than to an interactionism of sympathetic relationships.<sup>31</sup> In contrast to what happens in simple subjective appreciation (I like this wine), the claim to universality and its communication to another person who is free to contradict it takes precedence here over pleasure. The appeal to a common faculty of judgement precedes the singular pleasure which thus owes its existence to the possibility of it being based on something that can be presumed to exist in anyone else, so that 'the feeling of aesthetic pleasure is nothing other than the feeling of this communicability of judgement'.<sup>32</sup>

But the project of integrating political and aesthetic legitimacy, the public space and the circle of connoisseurs, in a single general form, a project which to a large degree was foreign to English aesthetics as Shapiro has shown,<sup>33</sup> is no longer relevant at the end of the century, and even less so after the French Revolution, for those whose judgement is henceforth authoritative in this area: artists, critics and amateurs. For what authorises the shift of aesthetic limitations from objects to subjects is, in a circular manner, precisely the detachment from politics that this shift makes possible. Certainly, the man of taste is an 'aristocrat of the mind' – not of birth (as Beau Brummell, the model of the dandy, boasts when claiming lowly origins in order to make the freely chosen aristocratic character of his tastes and manners more prominent).<sup>34</sup> But ideas like these do not conflict with the political constructions in which the democratic idea is worked out because this kind of aristocracy only manifests itself with regard to objects which henceforth are radically apolitical and, at the same time, marginal at the level of the rights of man, even if they may be essential in the sphere of definitions of human excellence.

Taste applies to objects which give secret pleasures whose existence is unsuspected by the common run of men (a commonplace found both in Hume and D'Alembert),<sup>35</sup> but because these pleasures have no political relevance they can therefore be defined as *frivolous* in relation to people's rights (as we saw Sade say when calling for the extension of aesthetic liberalism to sexual tastes, the secret society of those with such tastes perhaps being understandable as a metaphor of the nascent aesthetics). The constitution of the aesthetic as such, and its break with politics, thus accompanies the development of a democratic political project, sometimes in the same authors. Politics takes responsibility for almost everything in this division of labour: the construction of the State, the social bond, public morality and, again in Smith, the economy. The aesthetic is constructed as the thought of pleasure, of the secret, of the rest. In this its realisation is a

manifestation of that 'art of separations' which according to Michael Walzer is a characteristic of liberalism<sup>36</sup> and which continues the series of great divisions (between the natural and the supernatural, nature and society) which accompany the formation at the same time of an autonomous science of nature and a conception of the political as a contractual bond between human beings separated from the world of objects.<sup>37</sup>

But it is precisely in this apolitical space thus separated out and held in reserve that a theory of *difference*, of difference in the pure state, can be developed at the same time as the modern conception of political *equality* is being constructed. Difference constituted in this way, withdrawn from the jurisdiction of the public space to be confined within the order of pleasures, is *pure* difference in the sense that it is satisfied with its self-proclaimed existence. It is distinguished from the social differences with which politics is concerned inasmuch as it is not subject to an imperative of *justification* to the same extent and as a result it does not have to submit to a public test of its general validity. Its mode of manifestation is to be *affirmative*. But, as Reinhart Kosellek has shown for the establishment of the critical apparatus in the Enlightenment, withdrawal from politics may only be provisional.<sup>38</sup> In the way that criticism, which to start with sought to gain acceptance on the grounds that it was confined within the limited space of the Republic of Letters (Bayle's distinction between defamatory libel and legitimate criticism), then seizes hold of the entire political space at the end of the century, it is difference affirmed in matters of pleasures – that is to say in a domain outside of the public good and of no concern to the common run of people – which will constitute one of the most reliable bases of political anti-liberalism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

### 7.6 The passivity of the object

A spectator who sympathises with an unfortunate through a painter or, more generally, an *exhibitor*, thus finds himself freed, or, as we shall see, freed at least to a considerable extent, from the requirements of symmetry which were imposed on sympathy when it was conceived of as a political mechanism. For it is not claimed that the positions occupied by the painter and his object are reversible. In an aesthetic topic, the painter alone can see and show what is relevant about the unfortunate in his misery. There is not a great deal to be said about the relationship of the *misérable* to the painter however. Let us take again the example from *The Painter of Modern Life*. To be sure, if artists were to go more frequently, or more shrewdly, to brothels, they could 'find in the mire' a 'nobility' which is moreover everywhere

for those able to see it and be 'enchanted' by it. But those 'poses of a daring and nobility to enchant the most sensitive of sculptors' which are sometimes taken by prostitutes, are achieved 'quite by chance', without being intentionally sought. The beauty extracted from the horrific through this process of sublimation of the gaze, which is 'able to transform any object whatever into a work of art',<sup>39</sup> owes nothing therefore to the object. Being natural, within the tradition of the picturesque it only has worth in the eyes of a spectator who can constitute it as something worth looking at.<sup>40</sup> In the aesthetic of the *Salon de 1846* the natural world is a world stripped of the things that fill it, a world of pure subjects.<sup>41</sup> As a human object, this world is similarly radically without will. It is in this sense that fashion and caricature, which Baudelaire introduces into the field of aesthetic objects, are constituents of the modern conception of art. They share, as G. Froidevaux has shown, a 'shifting of beauty's site of origin from the object to the subject'. Actually, for Baudelaire, who in his essay 'On the Essence of Laughter' (*The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, pp. 147–65) takes the previous century's view of laughter (laughter is explained by the feeling of superiority man experiences with regard to another man or to nature), the caricaturist who aims to represent the ugly has 'the power to deform virtually all the objects of his observation and to create a representation whose comic effect is not due to the nature of what is represented, but to the nature of the contemplator'.<sup>42</sup>

What constitutes the painter's specificity and determines his disymmetry with regard to the object? It is his mobility. The painter in this topic, and the spectator when he sympathises with him, are able to change their positions in relation to objects which remain in their place. The *flâneur* who loses himself in the crowd of big cities<sup>43</sup> goes from the café to the street, from the brothel to the salon. In each of these places he sees wretched objects; he contemplates them and moves on. The same property is never conferred on the objects who, even when they are human objects, and even when they are granted the power to see (here, consequently, power par excellence), can only gaze on a single scene, the one before their eyes here and now (like the poor child gazing at the rich child of 'The Poor Child's Toy' in *Paris Spleen*). How is the Baudelairean *flâneur* distinguished from the hidden spectator – *Mr. Spectator* – who also constantly moves about, and whose metaphorical importance for setting up a public space defined by anaperspectival objectivity we have already noted? He is distinguished from him by the fact that the latter goes everywhere in order to join up networks. Each day he puts back into the common space what he has seen and, more importantly, heard in local places, so that he feeds a 'generalised conversation'. Lacking interiority he holds nothing back and so lets things go.



While similarly passing from one object to another, the *flâneur* devotes himself to a completely different process. In the first place he himself circulates so that when he is faced with different kinds of suffering different aspects of a limitless interiority well up. The *flâneur* is each time the same and different, becoming each of the unfortunates who appear before him.

Jerrold Seigel is right to situate the origin of the 'death of the subject' in the literary tradition in which the aesthetic topic is set out, the tradition which, from Sade to Bataille, passes through Baudelaire, Barbey or Huysmans.<sup>44</sup> None the less, we should be clear about what qualities of the subject disappear here. Death is the instance responsible. Actually, a subject which can be grasped in its unity can appear in terms of a retrospective and cumulative test, a final judgement. The subject really is 'dismissed', but only as a defendant. The 'radical liberation' Seigel speaks of – the destruction of the subject after that of the object, the concept of which he attributes to Sade as read by Bataille – is therefore solely a liberation from responsibility, which in any case logically follows from the setting up of a world without proper objects. It does not go so far as to give up the feeling of self in the experience of the moment, that is to say, it does not renounce enjoyment. In this topic it is by enjoying (or, what amounts to the same thing, simply by inverting the terms, by suffering), as an instance of enjoyment, that the 'exploded subject' of the *flâneur* lost in the crowd, drifting, given up to the impressions of the moment, exists, that is to say, can present the unrepresentable in its essentials through the multiple facets of a fragmentary writing.

### 7.7 The operation of the sublime on pity

A question cannot be avoided. What remains of sympathy in this topic? If the positive sympathy of the spectator is only addressed to the agent we have called the painter, and if there is nothing in his intentions which is directed towards the unfortunate as such, can we still speak of sympathy in the sense we take it to have in Adam Smith's arguments? To deal with this objection we must bring a relationship into play which we have neglected until now. An aesthetic topic does not dismiss the spectator's sympathy for the unfortunate, even if this relationship is weaker than the one he has with the painter (but likewise, does not Smith say that the spectator sympathises more intensely with the benevolence of the benefactor than with the gratitude of the sufferer?). This is what distinguishes it from the non-reversibility of a Sadean model. In fact, in this topic the spectator sympathises with the unfortunate inasmuch as the latter is *put on view*. He is 'subjected to the gaze', 'feels penetrated and *possessed* by the other' with the 'passivity of an

object being looked at' and 'becomes a thing in the eyes of others and in his own', as Sartre says with regard to Baudelaire.<sup>45</sup> But if he is put on view, it is in his suffering and by being inserted within an arrangement which, in the absence of a persecutor and benefactor, reveals the horror of this suffering and identifies it with evil – an evil irreducible to any scientific or religious kind of understanding and which can only be apprehended in an aesthetic grasp of the world.<sup>46</sup> It is because in the unfortunate evil is a suffering, because he is radically a suffering being, that the spectator here is distinguished from the Sadean hero immersed in the joys of debauchery. And in Baudelaire this sympathetic relationship may go so far as a quasi-identification with, for example, the ragpicker, who like the *flâneur* feeds from the refuse he gleans in the big city, or even more so with the streetwalker, who he 'nonchalantly includes . . . in the brotherhood of the *bohème*'.<sup>47</sup>

But this sympathy is not redemptive,<sup>48</sup> and if it sometimes promises compassion it is in order to shatter an expectation which is first aroused only in order to be deceived. Now the aesthetic topic rarely functions on its own. To produce its specific effect it must rapidly pass through other topics on which it briefly touches. Besides, the same could be said of the previous topics. Authentic indignation, for example, must pass through a pity which must be checked so that attention can be concentrated entirely on the identification and denunciation of a persecutor. Likewise, sentiment touches on indignation and keeps hold of it at the moment it turns into accusation in order to turn it around in the direction of the benefactor.

For examples we can take some of the pictures in *Paris Spleen* in which unfortunates, and specifically poor children, appear ('Cake', 'The Poor Child's Toy', 'The Eyes of the Poor' and 'Counterfeit'). The unfortunates at first seem to be described in terms taken from sentimental literature (to which Baudelaire directly refers in 'Cake': 'I was beginning to think the newspapers might not be so ridiculous, after all, in wanting to make us believe that man is born good' (*Paris Spleen*, p. 28)), which not only provoke pity for the being whose poverty they illustrate, but also open the way to tender-heartedness by arousing expectation of the arrival of a benefactor. But in these short sketches the expectation is immediately cut short by an outcome which radically departs from a topic of sentiment and seeks to plunge the reader into horror and disgust. The child who receives a piece of white bread from the narrator, for one short moment close to being a benefactor, which he sees as a cake, is savagely attacked by another equally poor child who could be his brother ('Cake'). In 'The Poor Child's Toy', the child with 'magnificent' toys looks enviously at the toy of a poor child beyond the gate on the highway. Is this a parable on the vanity of the goods of this world? No, the poor child's toy is a living rat in a box covered with

wire. Or, a 'dear love' one evening on the terrace in front of a dazzling café on the one hand, and, on the other, a *misérable* on the street accompanied by two children in rags. The picture is set for a scene of tender-heartedness (women are sentimental). But the woman demands that the narrator get the proprietor to send them away. A kind man, before going out, gets money ready to distribute to the poor on his journey. In the right trouser pocket he places a two-franc piece intended for a particularly generous offering. But it is counterfeit. The beneficence is only a secret enjoyment: 'there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than he expects' (*Paris Spleen*, p. 59).

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 Heroes and the accursed

## 8.1 Aesthetics and politics

To what extent does the aesthetic topic lend itself to political use? While the topics of denunciation and sentiment are orientated towards collective action, the former by making speech an instrument of mobilisation against those responsible for misfortune, the latter by making it a means for bringing together men of good will for beneficent assistance, and are thereby open to political investments, the aesthetic topic seems to renounce action and seems only to inspire a purely individual relationship to distant suffering. Besides, is it not mistaken to associate with a politics of pity with an attitude whose salient features are precisely not to be interested in politics and to reject pity? We will argue that the aesthetic topic was politicised in essentially two ways which, while being at the opposite poles of the political Right and Left, have enough in common to support swings from one to the other and to justify a connection in spite of their antagonisms and polemics.

We have seen that the novelty of an aesthetic view of the world is due to the possibility it offers, by the very fact of it not being political, of allowing a space for radical difference outside political constructions directed towards an egalitarian conception of the social bond. The models which attach distant suffering to political theory strive to distinguish the system of places from the empirical persons able to occupy them, which allows, as we have seen with regard to Adam Smith, a symmetrical apprehension of the relationship between the unfortunate and the spectator (the same being the case for the other places of persecutor and benefactor). But this requirement does not have the same force in an aesthetic topic which can therefore insert different persons firmly and durably in the different places. Through the eyes of the painter or exhibitor the spectator contemplates the unfortunate who is put on view, but this does not mean that the

43. I beg you, let us establish from the start as the solid bases of any such system', said Verneuil, 'that in the intentions of nature there is necessarily one class of individuals essentially subordinate to the other by weakness and by birth: given this, if the subject sacrificed by the individual who gives himself up to his passions belongs to this weak and deficient class, then the sacrificer has no more done anything evil than the owner of a farm who kills his pig.  
(D. A. F. de Sade, *Système de l'agression*, selected philosophical texts ed. N. Châtelet, Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1972, p. 119)
44. How can you want that someone who has received the most extreme inclination for crime from nature, either because of the superiority of his strength, of the refinement of his organs, or due to an education required by his birth or wealth, how I say can you want this individual to be judged by the same law as that of someone which everything directs towards virtue or moderation? Would a law which punishes these two men the same by more just? Is it natural that one which everthing induces to do evil be treated as one which everthing leads to conduct himself prudently?  
(*Ibid.*, pp. 120–1)
45. Cf. F. Manuel and F. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979, p. 545.
46. Quoted in Favre, p. 86.
47. Marquis de Sade, 'Yet another effort, Frenchmen, if you would become Republicans', in *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, in Marquis de Sade, *Justine, etc.*, pp. 296–339.
48. Manuel and Manuel, *Utopian Thought*, pp. 543–8. The same argument is employed by Roland Barthes, not to bring Sade back within the framework of egalitarianism, but to give the properties of a formal grammar to his constructions: In accordance with 'Sadian grammar',

In the scene, all functions can be interchanged, everyone can and must be in turn agent and patient, whipper and whipped, coprophagist and coprophagee, etc. This is a cardinal rule, first because it assimilates Sadian eroticism into a truly formal language, where there are only classes of actions, not groups of individuals, which enormously simplifies its grammar: the subject of the action (in the grammatical sense) can just as readily be a libertine, an assistant, a victim, a wife; second, because it keeps us from basing the grouping of Sadian society on the particularity of sexual practices.

Barthes recognises, however, that aside from torture, there is no trait reserved for the libertines alone. But how can 'Sadian scenes' be described by means of this grammar if one excludes tortures from them? See Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, transl. Richard Miller, London: Jonathan Cape, 1977, pp. 30–1.

49. Marquis de Sade, 'Yet another effort, Frenchmen', p. 321.

50. On the impossibility of a eugenic political system, cf., L. Thévenot, 'La politique des statistiques. L'origine social des enquêtes de mobilité sociale', *Annales ESC*, no. (6 November 1990), pp. 1275–300.

### 7 The aesthetic topic

- References are made in the text to the following works of Baudelaire: *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, transl. and ed. Jonathan Mayne, London: Phaidon Press, 1995; *Paris Spleen*, transl. Louise Varèse, New York: New Direction, 1990; and to *Œuvres complètes*, 2 volumes, Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975 (References to the *Œuvres complètes* are given in the text by volume and page numbers, e.g., I, p. 233).
- C. Grana, *Bohemian versus Bourgeois. French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century*, New York: Basis Books, 1964, pp. 139–55.
- Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, transl. Susan Emanuel, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.
- Arendt, p. 114.
- On the comparison between Baudelaire and Hugo, cf., Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, transl. Harry Zohn: London, NLB, 1973.
- Meyer Schapiro links this attitude to the experience of the Republic and to the frequent disillusion of writers and artists of the generation of 1848 which distanced them from politics. But it is only in Baudelaire that the renunciation of politics is integrated within the formation of a new aesthetic position based on 'disgust for society, from the bourgeoisie to the people'. M. Schapiro, 'Courbet et l'imagerie populaire', in *Style, artiste et société*, Paris: 1982, Gallimard, pp. 275–328.
- P. Pachet, *Le premier venu. Essai sur la politique baudelairienne*, Paris: Denoël, 1976, pp. 136–7.
- Cf., F. Coblenze, *Le dandysme, obligation d'incertitude*, Paris: PUF, 1988.
- Coblenze, pp. 125–7.
- On the theme of reflexivity in Baudelaire, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1947, pp. 23–4.
- In recent years the theme of the brothel in French literature and painting of the second half of the nineteenth century has been the subject of several studies published in the United States, partly under the influence of feminist literary criticism. See, for example, C. Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute. Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- On the many metaphorical uses of syphilis in French literature of the second half of the nineteenth century, cf., P. Lasowski, *Syphilis. Essai sur la littérature française du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris: Gallimard, 1982.
- Cf. J. Seigel, *Bohemian Paris. Culture, Politics and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830–1930*, New York: Penguin Books, 1986, pp. 100–1.

14. L. Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus. L'invention du goût à l'âge démocratique*, Paris: Grasset, 1990.
15. We can, like J.-M. Schaeffer, connect this opposition to a distinction between pleasures provoked 'by a representational activity exercised on an object' and pleasure (like sexual or culinary pleasures) in which 'representational activity is only ever anticipation of a transition to (bodily) action'. 'In aesthetic pleasure, it is representational activity as such (as an autonomous activity) which is the source of pleasure, so that we are led to maintain ourselves in that state rather than to transcend it towards a different action.' But, Schaeffer adds, in order to oppose the essentialisation of this distinction: 'A bodily activity can in turn become a self-sufficient representational activity exercised on itself. Thus the fact of eating or erotic activity can become the source of a second, aesthetic pleasure if they induce a pleasing representational activity exercised on the occasion of a bodily action (and no longer leading to that action).' J.-M. Schaeffer, *L'art de l'âge moderne. L'esthétique et la philosophie de l'art du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours*, Paris: Gallimard, 1992, p. 379.
16. S. Guerlac, *The Impersonal Sublime. Hugo, Baudelaire, Lautréamont*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 9.
17. Cf. S. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in Eighteenth Century England*, New York, Modern Language Association of America, 1935.
18. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boutton, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, pp. 39–40.
19. K. Lokke, 'The Role of Sublimity in the Development of Modern Aesthetics', *Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1982), pp. 421–30.
20. Burke, *Philosophical Enquiry*, pp. 38–41.
21. Cf. C. Hussey, *The Picturesque. Studies in a Point of View*, London: Frank Cass & Co., 1983, p. 61. Published in 1927, the seminal work of Hussey constitutes an excellent introduction to the history of the category of the 'picturesque'.
22. Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975, p. 99.
23. Hussey, *The Picturesque*, p. 64.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–75.
25. Cf. I. Ousby, *The Englishman's England. Taste, Travel and the Rise of Tourism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
26. On the aesthetics of the ugly and the grotesque in Goya, cf. M. Gagnebin, *Fascination de la laidure*, Lausanne: L'Age d'homme, 1978.
27. Cf. Derathé, *ibid.*
28. Cf. Dalston, *ibid.*
29. On the many debates on the identification of subjects of taste, cf., in particular, D. Cottom, 'Taste and the Civilized Imagination', *Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism*, vol. 39, (Summer 1981), pp. 367–80.
30. Romantic aesthetics takes sides against Kantian aesthetics in order to construct

- 'a doctrine of art, that is to say a definition of its essence based upon an evaluation'; this results in a 'sacralisation of the arts' and 'the construction of a speculative doctrine supposed to legitimise this sacralisation'. Cf. J.-M. Schaeffer, *op. cit.*, pp. 80–4. On the diffusion amongst painters of a conception of their activity centred on the idea of originality, see the works of Nathalie Heinich and, in particular, 'De l'apparition de l'artiste à l'apparition des Beaux-Arts', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol. 37 (January 1990).
31. G. Lebrun, *Kant et la fin de la métaphysique*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1970, pp. 355–87.
  32. Schaeffer, *ibid.*, p. 32.
  33. Cf. G. Shapiro, 'From the Sublime to the Political: Some Historical Notes', *New Literary History*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1985), pp. 213–35.
  34. Cf. J. Seigel, *ibid.*, p. 99.
  35. Cf. Cottom, 'Taste and the Civilized Imagination'.
  36. M. Walzer, 'La justice dans les institutions', *Esprit*, March 1992, pp. 106–22.
  37. Bruno Latour, *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, Paris: La Découverte, 1991.
  38. Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*, Oxford: Berg, 1988.
  39. G. Froidevaux, *Représentation et modernité*, Paris: Corti, 1989, p. 121.
  40. F. Leakey, *Baudelaire and Nature*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969, p. 139.
  41. F. Leakey, *Baudelaire. Collected Essays, 1953–1988*, ed. E. Jacobs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 161–73.
  42. Froidevaux, *Représentation*, p. 122.
  43. Benjamin, *ibid.*, pp. 35–67.
  44. Cf. J. Seigel, 'La mort du sujet: origines d'un thème', *Le Débat*, no. 58 (1990), pp. 160–9.
  45. J.-P. Sartre, *ibid.*, pp. 141–2 and 74.
  46. Cf. A. Toumayan, *La littérature et le mal. Lectures de Barbey d'Aurevilly, Huysmans et Baudelaire*, Lexington, Kentucky: French Forum Publishers, 1987.
  47. Benjamin, *ibid.*, pp. 19 and 34.
  48. Cf. P. Emmanuel, *Baudelaire*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1967.

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1. Nietzsche read Baudelaire late. He became aware of him on the occasion of two stays in Paris and through reading Paul Bourget, first in 1883–1884 and then in 1888. If, on the first reading, he interpreted Baudelaire in the spirit of Bourget as a 'master of decadence', that is to say as a shameful Christian obsessed by original sin, in his second reading (which was based upon Baudelaire's posthumous works published in 1887) he saw 'the superman loom up in Baudelaire' in the early form of the dandy with his 'modern heroism', 'his hatred for democracy' and his 'social sadism'. He then discovers in Baudelaire an 'alter ego', a